

The Director of Central Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
THROUGH : Chairman, National Intelligence Council
FROM :
Special Assistant for Warning
SUBJECT : Why Chernenko?
An Alternative View and Implications for Warning

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1. Initial assessments of Konstantin Chernenko's elevation to the post of general secretary have focused on the domestic political dimensions of the Politburo-Central Committee decision. This memorandum advances the hypothesis that foreign policy imperatives outweighed domestic considerations in determining the choice of Chernenko--specifically the Politburo's recognition that its political strategy for dealing with the Reagan Administration and INF deployment was in serious trouble. The hypothesis also contends that the selection of Chernenko was made several months ago when the leadership concluded there was little or no prospect that Andropov would recover and that the succession scenario was elaborated in detail well in advance of his death. Finally, this "theory of the case" holds that the four-day delay in convening the Central Committee to place its formal imprimatur on the Politburo's choice was not caused by resistance to Chernenko by younger members but rather by an agreed judgment that public disclosure should be withheld until the eve of Andropov's funeral in order to forestall a perceived possibility that President Reagan would attend the funeral.

Foreign Policy Context of the Succession Scenario

2. By late last summer, with Andropov in seclusion and the Reagan Administration effectively eluding sustained Soviet attempts to portray it as a "serious threat to peace," the Soviet drive to disrupt INF deployments and deepen transatlantic divergences over policy toward the USSR was running into the ground. The frustration of Moscow's political strategy was in large part the result of an underestimation of the Administration's political flexibility and resourcefulness in blunting Soviet political warfare. Since the spring of 1981, the Soviets had based their strategy on the assumption that the Administration would adhere rigidly to what were widely viewed in Europe as unnegotiable positions in the INF and START negotiations in 1981 and 1982. The Soviets were excessively confident that the President's unyielding posture would not only play into their hands but rapidly increase public resistance in Western Europe to INF deployments.

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3. The leadership's estimates and assumptions suffered a number of heavy blows in 1983, beginning with the victory of Chancellor Kohl's governing coalition in the 6 March elections, President Reagan's offer on 30 March to negotiate an interim INF agreement, and the adjustments in his START proposals on 8 June. These setbacks culminated in the international furor over the shootdown of KAL Flight 007 on 1 September, and Moscow's embarrassment was heightened by the President's address to the UN General Assembly on 26 September in which he made further adjustments in his INF negotiating position. These events had the effect of neutralizing the centerpiece in Moscow's political strategy--the attempt to discredit the Administration's foreign, defense, and arms control policies and to cast Washington in the role of an international villain committed to overturning the US-Soviet strategic balance and mounting "crusades" against the socialist countries. These Soviet objectives required a deliberate cultivation of a new cold war atmosphere in Soviet-American relations.

Succession Imperatives

4. The failure to block initial INF deployments in November and to undermine the Reagan Administration's credibility in Europe shaped the context in which the Politburo addressed the succession problem. By the autumn of 1983, the Soviets were irrevocably committed to implementing the three "countermeasures" that had been announced in late May and to terminating the Geneva arms control talks. The leadership had engaged its prestige and credibility at home and abroad so deeply in the campaign against the Euromissiles that the option of retreat or concessions was foreclosed. In sum, the Soviets had been cornered by their own misjudgments of the Administration and the strength of anti-nuclear and peace movements in Western Europe and by their moves throughout the year to raise the stakes in the contest over INF deployment. They had gone too far to entertain the option of abandoning their ambitious political strategy. In the minds of senior Politburo members, these circumstances dictated that the succession scenario must be managed in a way that would convey composure, continuity, and unity in the leadership. These imperatives ruled out the choice of any candidate who could not meet three main tests: (a) he must be well known at home and abroad as a senior and experienced member of the hierarchy; (b) he must be a credible symbol of continuity and unity; (c) his selection must not create confusion and uncertainty in the CPSU, Eastern Europe, and the West about the consistency of Soviet policies; he must not project false or misleading signals that the leadership might now undertake significant departures in domestic or foreign and defense policies.

5. Of the three members of the Secretariat generally regarded as the principal candidates, only Chernenko, as the senior secretary, met these tests. In the judgment of the senior Politburo members, the selection of either Gorbachev or Romanov would have conveyed uncertain and potentially troublesome signals. The deterioration in Andropov's condition in late August brought matters to a head, and the Politburo seniors began shortly thereafter to devise a succession scenario anchored to Chernenko as the symbol and putative guarantor of seniority, firm and confident control over policy, continuity, and unity. The scenario was calculated to symbolize steadiness and consistency in the transition from the Brezhnev era through Andropov's brief 15-month tenure to the elevation of another member of the elder

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generation. In short, no retreat or vacillation, particularly in resisting alleged US plans to achieve strategic superiority over the USSR.

6. The principal decisions governing the succession process probably were made by late November or early December. About that time, Chernenko and Premier Tikhonov--another symbol of seniority and continuity--began to take more conspicuous roles and precedence in public events. They were singled out from the rest of the Politburo (except Andropov of course) to receive a greater number of nominations for the elections to the Supreme Soviet on 4 March. This deliberate display of Chernenko's and Tikhonov's greater prominence was carried over into the arrangements for Andropov's funeral. Chernenko was named chairman of the funeral commission and Tikhonov delivered the speech to the Central Committee plenum on 13 February nominating Chernenko at the "unanimous" request of the Politburo. He hailed Chernenko as "a true associate of such Leninist-type leaders as Leonid Ilich Brezhnev and Yuriy Vladimirovich Andropov were." Chernenko's "acceptance" speech emphasized that "ensuring continuity in politics" is the "best way of paying tribute" to Andropov's memory. He also assured the country that the Central Committee and its Politburo "are acting...in concord and unity." Politburo seniors played predominant roles in all public ceremonies after Andropov's death. Chernenko, Tikhonov, Ustinov, and Gromyko stood at the forefront of the leadership during the lying-in-state and honor guard ceremonies on 11 February. At the funeral, Chernenko, Ustinov and Gromyko delivered eulogies, and these three, plus Tikhonov, were the only Politburo members to hold discussions on 14 February with East European party and government leaders.

7. When weighed against the logic, motivations, and intentions signalled by the succession and funeral scenario, claims by some Soviet officials, reported by a Western news service, that the delay in announcing the selection of Chernenko was caused by resistance on the part of younger members of the Politburo carry little credibility. Such claims should be discounted because they come from the small group of Soviet journalists and foreign affairs specialists to whom Western newsmen have access and who, as Dmitri Simes has noted, describe Chernenko as a "muzhik" whose only accomplishment was serving as Brezhnev's chief lackey. The senior members of the Politburo chose Chernenko because he was the most plausible candidate to meet the imperatives posed by a potentially costly impasse in foreign policy. Their choice was not contested by Gorbachev, Romanov, or other younger leaders. These men were fully aware of the reasons and stakes involved, and they supported the senior members' solution. Three days after the Central Committee meeting it was revealed that Gorbachev had closed the session with an appeal for unity in carrying out party policy, a distinction that appears to have been intended to convey that he now ranks as the senior party secretary under Chernenko and, as such, is the presumptive next-in-line for the top post.

The Delay in Announcing Chernenko's Elevation

8. The four-day delay between Andropov's death and the Central Committee's approval of the Politburo's "proposal" to elect Chernenko was not caused by disagreement in the hierarchy or by rival bids by Gorbachev or Romanov. It was a deliberate and carefully considered precaution to avert the dilemma that would have been created by a decision by President Reagan to attend the funeral. The Politburo sought to escape this dilemma by withholding disclosure of Chernenko's elevation until less than 24 hours before the

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funeral, assuming that this would afford Washington insufficient time to arrange a presidential trip. The leadership could hardly avoid naming Andropov's successor before the funeral, but they calculated that the President would not consider attending if he did not know whom he would be dealing with at least two or three days before the funeral. In retrospect, this precaution proved to be unnecessary in view of the early designation of Vice President Bush to represent the US, but the President's decision of course was not known when the Politburo devised the funeral scenario.

9. The Soviet leaders' suspicion that the President might embarrass them by attending the funeral was heightened by his 16 January speech on US-Soviet relations in which he said, "We must and will engage the Soviets in a dialogue as serious and constructive as possible..." and by similar remarks in his State of the Union address. This suspicion was only the most recent manifestation of the Soviets' apprehension since early last summer that President Reagan might corner them and cut the ground from under their political strategy by proposing a summit meeting in late 1983 or early 1984. They feared that their strategy to block INF deployment would be seriously compromised if they rejected an American summit invitation or were maneuvered into a meeting under unfavorable circumstances. In late June they took the precaution of having Gromyko pour cold water on summit prospects. He slyly noted that, "An outsider can get the impression that Washington is indeed giving serious thought to a (summit) meeting," but he insisted that the reality was quite different. "U.S. policy on relations with the Soviet Union," Gromyko contended, "does not pursue any constructive goals at all, of which American leaders make no secret." He proceeded to bar the door to a summit until "there appear in American politics real signs of a readiness to conduct affairs in a serious and constructive manner."

10. The Soviets remained apprehensive throughout the second half of 1983 that the Administration would play the summit card against them. Andropov told a group of nine US Democratic Senators on 26 August that while he favored a summit "in principle," it would be "meaningless" under existing circumstances. One of Andropov's motives in issuing his harsh denunciation of the Administration's policy on 28 September was to further discourage Washington from considering a summit bid. In addition to condemning the President for "foul-mouthed abuse mingled with hypocritical sermons on morality and humanity," Andropov asserted that, "If anyone has any illusions about the possibility of an evolution for the better in the present administration's policy, recent events have dispelled them once and for all." On 22 October, Georgiy Arbatov said the Soviet Union would not participate in a summit if it was "planned as a gimmick to help re-elect President Reagan." Three weeks later, Arbatov declared, "Even before the KAL incident, I thought there would be no US-USSR summit meeting. The reason is that as far as Mr. Reagan is concerned, such a meeting would be only a game for his reelection, and Mr. Andropov would see no reason why he has to be a partner in it." In early December, Arbatov said, "We are assuming that on the eve of the US presidential election we can expect the most incredible tricks. Reagan will act as the great man of peace; in the final analysis acting is his profession; that is why he was hired, the foremost actor among today's politicians."

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Implications for Warning

11. The predominant role in the succession scenario played by senior Politburo members and the balance of power in the leadership established by the promotion of Andropov's proteges and supporters at Central Committee plenums in June and December 1983, will hold Soviet policy to the general course that has emerged since the spring of 1981. Chernenko will preside over a more authentic collective leadership than that which prevailed in the last decade of the Brezhnev era or perhaps even during Andropov's 15 months as party chief. Soviet policy toward the US and Western Europe will continue to be managed primarily by Gromyko and Ustinov. Political strategy and tactics during the past year have carried the imprint of that most experienced of foreign policy masterminds, Andrei Gromyko. His promotion to first deputy premier last March, at the time of Andropov's first absence, was intended to invest Gromyko with greater authority in coordinating all the instruments of Soviet action in the international arena. It seems likely that Gromyko's influence will be even stronger under Chernenko than it was under Andropov.

12. In sum, the Soviets will not retreat from their ambitious strategy for exploiting the INF issue as leverage to alter the political equilibrium in Europe. Despite their failure to block initial deployments, the Soviets remain convinced that long-term trends in Western Europe will work to their advantage and that the Euromissile issue represents a point of great vulnerability in the Atlantic Alliance. As the second phase of INF deployments next fall approaches, Moscow will concentrate on attacking perceived contradictions between the commitments of the West German, British, and Italian governments to proceed with the deployment schedule and growing undercurrents of public resistance marked by widespread desires to see the missiles negotiated away. Soviet political and arms control initiatives will be tailored to erode the authority and political base of these governments to the point that they will be compelled to break with the Reagan Administration on NATO nuclear strategy.

13. The Soviet assessment of the Administration's intentions will not change, although the President's initiatives since mid-January to alter the atmospherics in US-Soviet relations will oblige Moscow to forego some of the more virulent rhetoric that characterized its pronouncements last year. This shift was already apparent before Andropov's death, notably in his last public statement on 25 January. Chernenko's initial statements and the Pravda editorial on 19 February drew upon Andropov's theme that any US-Soviet dialogue "should be conducted on an equal footing and not from a position of strength, as it is proposed by Ronald Reagan." Andropov declared that the Soviet Union is ready for talks to reach arms reductions "on the basis of the principle of equality and equal security." Pravda reported that Chernenko, in his talk with Vice President Bush, had "made the point that Soviet-American relations should be based on equality and equal security, on mutual consideration for the legitimate interests of the other side."

14. The elevation of Chernenko will not alter the basic Soviet view that the Administration's policy toward the Soviet Union, after three years in office, is firmly fixed in what they regard as a confrontational posture. Andropov's last statement expressed skepticism that the President's new conciliatory tone signalled a change in policy: "The American leadership, as all signs indicate, has not given up its intention to conduct talks with us

from positions of strength, from positions of threat and pressure. We resolutely reject such an approach." The Soviets of course have a powerful interest in refuting impressions abroad, particularly in Western Europe, that the Administration's policy is changing. They were much more comfortable when Administration leaders were expounding highly critical views of the nature and objectives of the Soviet regime because their political strategy relied on widening and exploiting transatlantic differences. This explains attempts by the Soviet media to represent the President's recent statements as nothing more than tactical adjustments addressed exclusively to the domestic audience in an election year. Moscow radio dismissed his 16 January speech as "nothing but purely face-lifting operations," and a Novosti political observer described it as words "uttered in some kind of vacuum."

15. The Soviets, however, are apprehensive about the impact of the President's statements in the past month in Western Europe, and they will seek in the near future to recover the initiative. One of their first moves may be to bring their familiar proposal for a moratorium on nuclear weapons production and deployment into the forefront of international attention. Andropov on 25 January recalled that, "We offer the US as a beginning a simple and at the same time sufficiently effective step--a freeze on nuclear arms." Arbatov on 24 January endorsed the Palme Commission's proposal for a one-year moratorium on deployment of nuclear missiles as a "valid proposal," describing it as "not much" but still an "opportunity to take stock and review the situation and perhaps find new initiatives."

16. Moscow's major initiative in the next six months probably will be a new and comprehensive arms control proposal that will redefine strategic weapons to include the Pershing II and cruise missiles, British and French missiles, and at least some Soviet and NATO "medium-range nuclear delivery aircraft." The Soviet statement on 8 December justifying a recess in the START talks without setting a date for their resumption contended that the "change in the overall strategic situation" created by INF deployments required the Soviet Union to "reexamine all the issues" subject to discussion. Soviet officials have claimed that the Euromissiles have not only invalidated Moscow's proposal to reduce strategic weapons by 25 percent but violated the SALT II treaty because INF and British and French missiles are considered to be strategic weapons.

17. There is a strong possibility that the Soviets will insist that their new comprehensive proposal requires a broadening of the talks to include all the nuclear powers. A hint that Moscow will propose that China be included in a five-power negotiating forum appeared in Andropov's Pravda interview on 26 August: "As we understand it, PRC leaders now seem to be displaying interest in certain questions relating to nuclear and other weapons under discussion at the United Nations and in the Geneva Disarmament Committee. If this trend develops there is no doubt that China could make a considerable contribution to the solution of problems linked with averting nuclear war and ending the arms race." In late October, Arbatov declared, "It is impossible to fully ensure the security of the world or achieve disarmament without China's complete participation." Translated into specific proposals, this rhetoric suggests that the Soviets have replied to China's complaints about SS-20 deployments in eastern USSR by holding out the prospect of limitations or reductions if the Chinese agree to join a five-power forum and accept limits on their long-range missiles.

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18. The Soviet leaders almost certainly believe that a new proposal based on a broader and more inclusive definition of strategic weapons will be rejected by the US, Britain and France, but they would also expect that it will attract considerable interest in West Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The crucial question concerns the steps the Soviets intend to take after their proposal has been rebuffed. Andropov's 24 November statement indicated that the scope and pace of Soviet "countermeasures" will be geared to the scale of INF deployments. Soviet actions so far suggest that they are adhering to Andropov's declaration that "countermeasures from the Soviet side will be restricted strictly to the limits which will be dictated by the NATO countries' actions." These guidelines, however, would not preclude Soviet actions calculated to precipitate a limited and controlled confrontation with the US. The Soviets, for example, may intend to disclose the presence of a substantial force of ballistic and cruise missile submarines off US coasts in a provocative manner, with the aim of eliciting a strong reaction from the Administration. A delphic hint of a move of this nature was made in late January by Valentin Falin, a senior Izvestia commentator. Falin predicted that the Administration will want to negotiate intensively on the changed strategic situation when it feels the weight of Soviet countermeasures. Speaking to Don Oberdorfer of the Washington Post, Falin said, "You will begin serious talks. I am convinced."

19. If such a strategem succeeds in triggering a crisis atmosphere, the Soviets may attempt to turn the tables on Washington by offering to withdraw their missile submarines in exchange for the removal of the Euromissiles and a renunciation of NATO's 1979 deployment decision. As part of this deal, Moscow may revive Brezhnev's proposal of March 1982 to limit the patrol areas of each side's missile submarines.

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